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Russia's Political and Military Problems in Central Asia [Excerpt on Tajikistan]

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Introduction

Though it is nearly a thousand miles from the Russian border to Afghanistan, Russian political and military leaders have been closely following the recent events transpiring in their distant neighbor. While some in the West have approved of the consolidation of power in large parts of Afghanistan by the fundamentalist Taliban forces, leaders in Moscow have become alarmed at this prospect. They view this radical Islamic movement as a distinct threat to their national interests in Central Asia and among the Muslim population of Russia itself. The following article, written in 1995, article addresses the rationale behind their concerns.

In an effort to better understand the potential threats stemming from Islamic extremism, we offer a translation of an article written by General-Major (ret) Slipchenko, entitled "Russia's Political and Military Problems in Central Asia." Because of the length of the original article, this version has been edited without distorting the author's main argument. Based on the author's observations in the region, this article describes the situation in Central Asia from a Russian military specialist's point of view. The portion excerpted deals with the dilemma facing Russia in protecting the border and the government in Tajikistan (which shares an 800-mile border with Afghanistan) .

It is worthwhile to recall that since the pullout of Soviet forces from Afghanistan almost ten years ago, the Afghan people have been subject to continuous civil war. After the collapse of the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul, the Mujahedin split apart and a power struggle among the factions ensued. Only with the appearance of the Taliban movement and its military successes did a large part of the country come under the control of a single, and in this case, radical Islamic government. The fall of Kabul to the Taliban in September of this year put that government in power over most of Afghanistan, but did not end the fighting to the north of Kabul, where the forces of Generals Masood and Dostum remain in the field and have mounted a counter-offensive toward Kabul.

The situation has been equally tragic in Tajikistan, where for the past four years, civil war and internecine conflict have left the country largely in ruins. This interim has also been painful for the Russians, who in the last decade have seen their empire collapse, their standard of living plummet, their global reputation sullied and their military fallen into disarray. This humiliation, combined with a deep-seated fear of being challenged by militant forces in the region, might explain the apocalyptic tone of Gen Slipchenko's article.

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As a result of the Soviet Union's collapse, the former Soviet Middle Asia has changed its geographical countenance and has become Central Asia. As soon as Moscow lost direct control over this region, a political and strategic vacuum was. In the interests of stability that vacuum needs to be filled, and the process has already begun. However, Central Asia is a special region, and any contender desiring to achieve hegemony there will first face some fairly substantial cash outlays and, second, it will have to take a large political risk. In this process, these expenditures will go not only into drawing central Asian territories into the contender's sphere of influence, but also into an inevitable confrontation with other Asian-continent competitors. Further, the required expenditures will be extremely burdensome, and they will not yield a quick return.

To a certain degree Western Europe is now a monolithic whole, and Eastern Europe is seeking ways to move closer to the West, but Central Asia presents the opposite case -- it is coming apart: separatist tendencies are growing stronger, national differences are being intensified, and inter-state contradictions are growing. In Central Asia one finds a different attitude even toward such classic concepts as "freedom," "democracy" and "human rights." The Central Asian versions of these concepts frequently differ from similar ones in the West. Moreover, in Central Asia the spread of the Western conception of basic ideas is seen as nothing short of interference in internal affairs. This is a product of the unique features of the structure of Asian society and its culture. Here some states categorically oppose the principle of the inviolability of borders and cannot understand why one should not be able simply to cross a border. Their forefathers knew no borders, and they do not recognize them. Therefore, it is extremely difficult to develop an acceptable plan for filling the "vacuum" in Central Asia. For the time being, such a plan does not appear practical in the political sense or substantive in the scientific sense.

To a great degree, independence came unexpectedly to today's sovereign states of Central Asia, even for these nations themselves. Their leaders understood that they were not ready for complete sovereignty. Thus, they were amenable to continuing a great degree of dependence on the USSR, which then was living out its last days. It should also be noted that these countries remained the most consistent supporters of preserving the Union. Thus it is completely logical that they were among the first to support the idea of concluding an alliance agreement in any form. After all, they were the first ones ready to sign the Novo-Ogaryevsk agreements not to create a union, but rather a confederation. When the final drafts of these accords were broken by the August 1991 military *putsch* in Moscow, these same states were the first to join the CIS, although, as is well known, Russia, Ukraine and Belarus signed the Belovezh accords without them.

Much time has passed since then. Notable and important changes have come about in the thinking of the leaders of these Central Asian countries.

With the exception of the warring Tajikistan, the logic of the transformations has become clearer in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. All of these transformations closely resemble the Chinese model. Here also, as was the case with China in its time, the old communist elite remained in power and strengthened its positions. It has used harshly authoritarian methods in an attempt to preserve political stability while simultaneously trying to create the conditions necessary for developing national capital and for attracting foreign capital. The most typical characteristic of these regimes is their highly structured nature, which in turn defines the lives of the citizens and makes impossible any potential dissidence or any competition in civilian society. Here we find a heavily centralized, monolithic power structure in which the dominant group does not answer to an elected body and cannot be removed from office by any institutional peaceful means. Such regimes are characterized by unitary ideology and a mobilized populace which carries out political and social tasks under the purview of a whole series of legitimate institutions. These institutions virtually nip in the bud

any form of autonomous societal or political organization, and the result is a society completely steeped in politics.

The idea of nationhood for each state of Central Asia is growing widely, something which is completely normal. The influence of Islam in the region is also growing. Russia has not yet defined her politics toward the region as a whole, even though as of 1995 (with the exception of Kazakhstan) more than two million Russian-speaking residents remained there.

Tajikistan

Tajikistan has taken its own path, which has so far been distinguished only by a military confrontation of forces struggling to gain power. The internal political conflict, which began immediately after the destruction of the post-Soviet structures, has today taken on the characteristics of an irreconcilable clash between the current leadership of the country and its opponents. Since coming to power in 1992, the current leadership has taken virtually no steps toward a dialogue with the rather powerful opposition, apparently reckoning that it can bring peace to the republic exclusively at bayonet-point. Tajikistan's official leadership has not managed to take the situation in hand. The opposition has responded to pressure with redoubled resistance and is also placing its hopes on a forcible overthrow of the existing order. The presidential election and constitutional referendum of late 1994 were not high priorities and cannot today assure peace and stability in Tajikistan. The reelected *Madzhils Oli* (Upper Chamber) also holds no promise. Like the previous parliament, it will probably not be an independent organ of power. The majority of its leaders are from the President's home area, the Klyab region, as is the case in other government structures.

Of late the topic of Tajikistan has been seen only in light of the war on the Tajik-Afghan border or inside the country. However, the country's economic condition and potential are being completely ignored. And the potential is not meager. Tajikistan occupies 141.1 thousand square kilometers, and half of this territory is 3000 meters above sea level. This is a mountainous country, and its rather large but so far unclaimed reserves of raw fuel and ore represent the country's basic riches.

Tajikistan ranks second among CIS countries in terms of hydroelectric potential and water reserves. Tajikistan has plants that until recently served as Russia's primary source of aluminum, titanium-oxide and vanadic catalysts, bismuth, antimony and barium. Tajikistan is still capable of renewing production of transformers, refrigerators, textile and other machines. In the not-so-distant Soviet past, as much as 900,000 tons of raw-seed cotton were produced in Tajikistan. Moreover, this country has enormous capabilities for growing fruit and vegetables. Tajikistan clearly needs assistance not only in protecting its borders, but also in reestablishing and developing its economy, without which there will never be any stabilization.

To reinvigorate the country's economy the first requirement will be to restore and improve the transportation system. The following issues are extremely urgent: major repair of the strategic roadway between Osh and Khorog; construction of a tunnel through the Hissar mountain chain on the road between Dushanbe and Khudzhant; and construction of a railroad between Kurgan, Tyube and Klyab (currently the track there is the narrow type).

All of this will only be possible through mutually beneficial cooperation between Tajikistan and Russia, rather than through unlimited financial assistance from Russia.

Right now in Tajikistan the situation with regard to agriculture and industry is catastrophic. By late 1994 the level of industrial production had fallen by 52% as compared with 1993, which was itself a bad year. All construction has been stopped. There is nothing to work the ground with, no food, no clothing or any of the bare necessities for the people's survival. Delivery of these vital necessities from other CIS countries has almost come to a complete halt.

It is well known that General Dostum, commander of the Afghanistan group "North," has openly declared the existence of forces in his country which wish to annex Tajikistan to Afghanistan at any price. And they are indeed doing everything possible toward this end: training warfighters, supplying them with weapons, sending Mujahedin into Pamir canyons and directing them to the Tajik-Afghan border. The general himself does not rule out the possibility that he might participate in, or even win, in a new Afghan presidential election. This is the source of the confrontation facing Russian troops and the present regime in Tajikistan, and it is also the reason for the great number of deaths among Russian border troops and the Tajik citizenry. According to data that are far from complete, more than 60,000 private citizens have already perished. About a million residents of the republic have been forced to leave. Fewer than 100,000 Russian-speaking people now reside in Tajikistan, 80% of whom live in the North, where there has never been any combat. However, in the South where there is fighting, no Russians remain, except for two to three thousand primarily elderly people who are in mixed marriages. It is for this reason that the Russian military presence is difficult to explain, i.e., that of the 201st Motorized Rifle Division, as is the role of the Collective Peacekeeping Force.

The most powerful grouping of Russian Border Troops is also located in Tajikistan. Their status is defined by the appropriate inter-state agreements and accords. However, they are not carrying out any sort of noble mission to defend Russians from harassment by Islamic fundamentalists, nor are they capable of performing such a mission. The full length of the Tajikistan national border runs some 2,000 kilometers, but only a small portion of it is reliably protected. The Russian Border Troops are located only on a few key border sectors, although Uzbek, Kyrgyz and Kazakh battalions also participate in guarding the border. It should also be mentioned that within the Pyandzh and Kalayn-Khumb border detachments are now the first subunits staffed by Tajik border troops.

Tajik authorities deliberately inflate the number of Russian-speaking citizens supposedly residing there permanently. They fear that without this argument Russia might recall her troops, in which case the ruling regime could lose everything, both its power and the state. However, the great majority of Tajiks remain convinced of the reverse, i.e., that the Russian troops have come to their country for the sole purpose of propping up the current ruling regime. Therefore, both the population of the republic and the opposition, inside the country and beyond its borders, are in solidarity on this issue and view the Russian troops as an occupation force. It should be particularly noted that there are two hostile sides engaged in the intra-Tajik political confrontation, i.e., the government and the opposition. In fact, even the government forces themselves are split by internal conflicts. The current opposition consists of more than just small, individual armed groups, and it enjoys the support of a significant portion of the Tajik population, divided along various clan lines. The opposition is a serious political and military force and, as has already been mentioned, it has even been recognized by the president of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, who had formerly placed his bets on the official government in Dushanbe. The opposition, as is characteristic of the Islamic East, is prepared to die in its struggle to overthrow the ruling regime and displace the occupiers. It appears that Imomali Rakhmonov will be forced to consent to several terms of the opposition, chiefly the lifting of the ban on activities by opposition parties and independent newspapers, as well as the creation of a coalition government and a Governmental Council.

If Russia is prepared to continue supporting only the ruling regime, then it will have to continue increasing the size of its military contingent there. So far it appears that Russia is prepared to do so, since two thousand soldiers were sent to Tajikistan in May of 1995, where there are now already some 25,000 soldiers. While Imomali Rakhmonov's ruling regime does make small concessions to the opposition, it is also completely obvious that it will never share its power with them. Instead, it will only concern itself with self-preservation, which means that the civil war will continue for a long while to come. This explains why in the spring of 1995 the opposition began broadly building up its presence in the Garm group of areas, in the Darvaz area of Gornyy Badakhshan, as well as in the swath of border area on Afghan territory. Unfortunately, the winter silence here was not utilized to search for and reach a compromise between the sides in the conflict. Incidentally, it should be mentioned that the most powerful opposition forces focus their operations on the Russian border troops.

In April of this year [1995] the opposition launched a true "Jihad" against the Russian border troops. The young Russian border guards are paying the price for the mediocrity and irresponsibility of Russian politicians and of those who are responsible for Russian interests in Tajikistan, i.e., the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Russian Parliament.

The opposition is continually receiving the solid financial backing of non-governmental Islamic political organizations located in a number of Islamic countries. The opposition's ranks are augmented by trained professional fighters. As it shifts to active operations, the opposition is fully capable of taking control of the Darvaz area and the Khaburobat pass in Gornyy Badakhshan. This would allow the unhindered movement of munitions, weapons and loosely organized units of militants from Afghanistan into Tajikistan. So far everything is headed toward a total repetition of the situation in Afghanistan and with Russian involvement.

No talk of "defending CIS borders" can justify this flawed Russian policy, and yet Russian boys are dying there every day. At the 12th outpost alone of the Moscow Border Troop Unit, the outpost commanded by Captain Oleg Buryakov, twenty-five Russian border troops died in 1993, and twenty-eight in 1994. Russian border troops have already lost their lives in 1995. Tajikistan's hottest spots are Kalay-Khumb, Khorogsk, and the Ishkashim axes, which are guarded by border troop units with the same names as the regions they guard, as well as by the Moscow unit. Currently the opposition has slightly reduced its level of activity along the Darvaz axis (the Afghan province Darvaz). However, there is a sharply rising danger that the bridgehead area in Gornyy Badakhshan will be taken, and as has been emphasized, this area plays a strategic role, since it leads in the direction of Dushanbe.

More than a year of Russian peacekeeping operations in Tajikistan confirms a couple of things. First, the number of Russian peacekeeping forces there is inadequate, and second, the commander of these forces must be given continually expanded authority to control selected units and subunits. In particular, because of extremely complex situations which typically arise unexpectedly, the commander must have the right to make decisions independently under the concrete, evolving circumstances, and then he should make a report to the heads of state and ministers of defense of the [CIS] member-states. To this end, a command-staff exercise was conducted for the collective peacekeeping force stationed in Tajikistan. It took place in March of 1995, forty kilometers from the Tajik-Afghan border, on the territory of the southern Shaartuz region. Participants in the exercise included the 201st Russian Motorized Rifle Division, as well as Uzbek Ministry of Defense units that are part of the peacekeeping force. In the author's opinion, it is now urgent that Parliament and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs sort out the situation of the CIS peacekeeping forces. Developing a concrete plan for the peacekeeping operation is essential, a plan that takes into account both a realistic Tajik policy and the specifics of this republic and of the entire region. For now, it is surprising that with the onset of combat actions on the Tajik-Afghan border in April 1995, the group of Russian Border Troops in Tajikistan has not received assistance from the 201st Motorized Rifle Division or from other units that make up the coalition peacekeeping force. The Russian Defense Ministry has not reacted to the request from the command of the Russian Border Troops to fortify border troop outposts with mobile armor groups and artillery, nor has it responded to requests for air strikes on clustered bands of militants. Oddly, this clearly demonstrates P. Grachev's personal enmity toward A. Nikolaev (and perhaps vice-versa, as well). The former commander of the peacekeeping force, General Patrikeev, absent an order from his minister, was simply afraid to make independent decisions and continually offered every possible excuse, for which he was eventually and justifiably removed from his position.

The fundamental myopia of the Russian leadership has already gone too far, and in this case it represents a greater danger to Russia than Islamic fundamentalism represents to Central Asia. Is not this mission too costly for Russia? After all, in Tajikistan, in addition to Russia, the USA, Turkey, China, Iran, Pakistan and India all have full-fledged embassies. Moreover, the German, Austrian and Japanese embassies are open at the level of *ad interim chargé d'affaires*, but none of them is showing any interest in the problems of protecting the security of this politically unstable state.

Due to the presence of a military opposition, Tajikistan's own national armed forces are undergoing more intensive build-up than is the case in other countries of the region. However, financial difficulties will apparently delay the emergence of these forces until at least 2000. At present Tajikistan has two motorized rifle brigades (one of them is a training brigade), a special operations brigade and detachment (all primarily intended for the protection of the ruling regime), and a combined aviation squadron. Tajikistan further has a basic set of units and subunits that provide operational, technical and logistic support.

Russia is providing great support for the creation of a national army and is also training command and engineer personnel. It is true that a higher military college has been created and is now functioning in Tajikistan. However, all of this is far from what should have been done as the first priority. Despite Russia's huge financial outlays to support the ruling regime in Tajikistan, and despite all the attempts on the part of the Russian Defense Ministry to assist in the creation of a combat-ready army, this army is being created very slowly. Russian taxpayer money is being wasted. Full-fledged military units (two to three brigades) should have been formed and fully armed and equipped with everything they need. These units should have been formed using Defense Ministry units, MVD units and units of Tajikistan's National Security Ministry which already exist in Gornyy Badakhshan. Favorably disposed detachments of the Gornyy Badakhshan self-defense should be included in these units, and their basic mission should be to assist the border troops and maintain order in the Gornyy Badakhshan autonomous republic. However, the Tajik army as it is now being created has a serious problem, i.e., nobody wants to serve in it.

If these steps are not taken, then the following events could unfold:

- First, one could expect increasing combat actions in the Darvaz region of Gornyy Badakhshan, and combat actions would also be possible along the Ishkashim axis in the Porshnev area;
- Next, the opposition will try to take control of the strategic Khoburobat pass and will simultaneously increase the size of the group of military opposition forces in the Garm group of regions, which could also at this time shift to active combat actions in the Pamir region. Pressure will grow along the Kulyab axis;
- The peak of the combat actions should be expected to occur simultaneously on the border and inside the republic. Terrorist activity is rising sharply, primarily against Russian citizens who have remained in Tajikistan. Anti-Russian sentiment will also rise in a number of Moslem countries, and there will be an increased flow of Mujahedin from these countries, as well as increasing financial assistance to the opposition.

It should be particularly noted that over the next one to two years, the opposition's arsenal could acquire the latest weapons for waging war, including aircraft, high-accuracy missiles, electronic warfare assets, etc.

The Russian proponents of continuing military aid to Tajikistan currently have two primary arguments. The first argument says that if the Russian forces depart, then at the very least the Islamic population would drive all Russian-speaking peoples out of the republic, and, in the worst-case scenario, they would destroy them. This argument is a weak one, because the overwhelming majority of Russians have long since left the republic, and the remainder are fleeing now. The second argument foresees that Islamic fundamentalism coming from Tajikistan through Kazakhstan will penetrate into the Islamic portion of Russia and begin to split Russia from inside. However, this argument is also unconvincing, since Russia's Moslems are currently experiencing great difficulty in pulling together, and their relatively small numbers will not present an internal threat.

Russian Involvement

The governmental power structures in the region now face a common challenge: preventing any violations of territorial integrity, including that of the contiguous states, since such a violation would be extremely dangerous in terms of setting a precedent. Nevertheless, the current system of regional affinity as it is developing in

Central Asia carries significant potential for conflict. If Russia continues to play the role of stabilizing force and arbitrator, the situation will require a constant increase in its contingent of forces and assets. The number of human losses will rise, not to mention the huge material costs. Only by relying on such forcible support in the region can the ruling regimes there hold out. However, there will be no real stability and no real peace, and for a long time to come Russia will continue to be drawn into this senseless adventure, virtually into a second Afghanistan. After all, in performing the role of peacekeeper for one set of forces inside the country, Russia will also be a constant source of antagonism for another set of forces, i.e., the opposition forces and the forces of Islam. Every attempt will be made to draw Russia into military actions on the side of forces which are countering Islamic fundamentalism. This in turn is fraught with the danger of full-scale conflict with the neighboring Islamic regimes, as well as conflict with the Moslem minority in Russia. In a number of formerly autonomous territories this Moslem minority is laying claim to the status of "internal foreign country," for example, Chechnya and Tartarstan. It would be extremely dangerous to increase antagonism with Russian Moslems because of a flawed policy toward Central Asia.

For the foreseeable future, Russia will be forced into a de facto state of geopolitical defensiveness, since her economic and military potential over the next few years will scarcely suffice to assure internal stability and prevent the collapse of the federation. This situation makes any long-term Russian imperial strategy policy toward Central Asia difficult to justify. The basis for Russia's geopolitical strategy during the current period of collapse and decline should probably be a preemptive scaling back of Russia's zone of direct involvement and control, particularly in the region under discussion. However, one should not turn away from the opportunity to provide for the migration of the Russian population out of the countries of the region and into Russian Federation territory.

Conclusions

Confrontation with the Moslem world cannot be permitted. The war between the Soviet Union and Afghanistan, as well as Russia's current, simultaneous war with both the anti-Tajik opposition and the very same Afghanistan, have created an anti-Islamic image for Russia. The war in Chechnya has now become the last straw in the hostility of the Moslem world toward Russia, turning her into the main enemy of Moslems. This world believes that the Third World War has already begun here in Central Asia -- in Afghanistan, and that it is now continuing in Tajikistan, Chechnya and the former Yugoslavia. The Moslem south has united in a holy war against the Christian north. They believe that it was the Mujahedin that brought the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact down, and they do not intend to stop until they reach the Kremlin. They will then turn toward Western Europe and continue their "jihad" there. In Moslem countries the Tajik war is really perceived quite differently than in Russia. The citizens of Russia have no idea what Russia is fighting for in this country. But Moslems who live in the region have no doubt what they are fighting for. Although the leaders of Islamic countries officially proclaim their neutrality in the Tajik conflict, they are unsuccessful in concealing their true attitude toward this conflict, even on the level of formal etiquette. Apparently, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Iran are the chief sponsors of the Tajik opposition. These are mere guesses, of course, since no one will name the sponsors, fearing that they will be seen as abettors of international terrorism, with all the resultant consequences.

How paradoxical it is that Russia is now creating an Islamic state in Tajikistan with her own hands. The war there is not being fought, as we would like to convince ourselves, between the official state, led by Imomali Rakhmonov, and the opposition, led by Said-Abdulla Nuri. In fact, it is being fought between Islam and Russia. People of extremely diverse persuasions are coming under the banners of Islam, essentially joined only by one thing, their antipathy for Russia and for Christianity. Moscow's policy in Tajikistan and in all Central Asia can hardly come as a surprise. It supports the current regimes and does not even attempt to ponder the future. If Russia's leadership does not develop a flexible policy in Central Asia, then she will have to exit from this zone of her vital interests. These are not merely reflections. They are reality, and the entire situation is very dangerous.

